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Re-counting Migrant Women's Invisibility: Feminist Interventions and the Gendered Foundations of Migration Studies

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Abstract

This article traces the intellectual development of feminist migration studies, charting the field's transformation from the invisibility of women in early migration research through the foundational work of the 1980s and 1990s, the transnational analyses of the 2000s, and the critical and intersectional approaches of the 2010s and 2020s. It examines how feminist scholarship redefined migration as a gendered, relational, and embodied process, revealing how women's movements, labour, and care practices both sustain and transform global systems of mobility, belonging, and power. By foregrounding women's reproductive, care, and affective labour, feminist theorists re-signified what counts as work and value, exposing the intimate foundations of global capitalism. More recent contributions in intersectional and critical border studies reveal how gender, race, class, and citizenship intersect to produce stratified regimes of mobility and control. The article concludes by revisiting the enduring tension between agency and constraint, proposing it as a key interpretive lens for understanding how migrant women navigate and transform structures of domination. Recounting women's historical invisibility thus remains not only a historiographical task but an epistemological and political intervention in how migration continues to be studied, governed, and imagined.

Keywords: Gender, Feminism, Intersectionality, Border regimes, Migration governance.

Introduction

On the night of 28 May 2025, a rickety boat carrying 145 migrants from West Africa limped toward the Spanish Canary Islands. Among them were women and girls—nearly half of the passengers—clinging to hope and each other. As the vessel capsized just metres from the shore of La Restinga in deep waters, four women and three girls drowned, trapped beneath decks and waves (Okba Mohammad & Sánchez, 2025)

This tragedy is far more than another migration statistic. It is a stark reminder that women's mobility, in all its dimensions of survival, resilience, and loss, is a lived reality and yet it often remains hidden within dominant accounts of migration. This invisibility has shaped both scholarship and policy, narrowing migration to an economic process and obscuring the

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gendered realities of movement, labour, and belonging. By centring men's journeys, scholarship and policy alike have left the experiences of women—those who cross deserts, seas, borders for safety, work, family, agency—on the margins. Yet when we ignore migrant women, we obscure the full spectrum of migration: the motives that are not simply economic but familial and relational; the labour that is not just in factories but in homes, caring for children, negotiating new languages and societies; the courage that stays behind while someone else moves; the grief of those who never arrive.

The drowning of those seven young lives off La Restinga is a devastating emblem of what we do not see. The silence surrounding these deaths mirrors a longer intellectual silence—one that has shaped how migration has been studied and narrated, where women's movements, struggles, and contributions have too often remained unseen or misrepresented.

For this reason, recounting the long-standing invisibility of women in migration—both as a process of retelling and as an epistemological reassessment—remains crucial to understanding how knowledge about mobility has been produced, silenced, and transformed over time. When women first entered the analytical frame of migration research, they were typically portrayed as dependents or passive "followers" of male migrants (Buijs, 1993; Kofman, 1999). Early models, presented as gender-neutral, were in fact built upon men's experiences, reproducing male-centred assumptions about mobility, work, and agency (Anthias, 2001a, 2001b; Anthias & Lazaridis, 2000; Kofman et al., 2000; Brah, 1996). For a long time, mainstream migration scholarship continued to depict women as less mobile and more locally bound than men, thereby overlooking their independent migratory strategies, economic contributions, and transnational engagements.(Freeman, 2001; Mazali, 2001). Although recent scholarship has increasingly attended to the intersections of gender (and class, race, and citizenship) and migration, these efforts have yet to dismantle the deep-seated hierarchies that structure migration knowledge itself. The field still privileges the measurable over the relational and the economic over the affective, continuing to treat gendered experiences as secondary—even though research has consistently demonstrated that they are central to understanding how migration is lived, governed, and reproduced.

In this article, I review theories of migrant women that emerged from the 1990s onward, engaging these debates to establish a framework for theorising the more visible presence of women — a visibility that not only reflects changes in global mobility dynamics but also signals how decades of scholarship have transformed our interpretation of women's migration. I ask how gender moved from absence to analytical core in migration research, which conceptual and methodological innovations made women's migrations visible, and which biases have persisted despite these advances. I also explore the continuities and ruptures between feminist political-economy, transnational, and intersectional approaches, and examine how contemporary regimes of border control, legality, and citizenship reproduce gendered and racialised hierarchies of mobility. Finally, I consider what holding agency and constraint in tension allows us to see about migrant women that earlier binaries between victimhood and emancipation obscured.

Assessing this intellectual development is not merely a historiographic exercise but a critical intervention in how migration continues to be studied and governed. Tracing this genealogy reveals how the field has moved from documenting women's presence to interrogating the structures — economic, affective, and epistemic — that make some forms of movement visible and others invisible. It also reaffirms the relevance of feminist, intersectional, and

decolonial perspectives as tools not only for analysis but for reimagining the terms of global mobility, belonging, and justice. By situating contemporary debates within this longer genealogy, the article argues that understanding the development of gendered migration scholarship is essential for confronting today's crises of mobility, border violence, and epistemic exclusion — and for envisioning more just and inclusive futures of movement.

The article proceeds in four sections. The first revisits the early interventions of the 1980s and 1990s that challenged the invisibility of migrant women and established migration as a gendered social process. The second examines post-2000 developments, focusing on transnational, political-economy, and care-chain analyses that linked women's labour to global capitalism. The third traces the emergence of reflexive, intersectional, and critical border approaches that expose the racialised and gendered hierarchies embedded in mobility regimes. The final concluding section reflects on the conceptual tension between agency and constraint, proposing it as a framework to understand how migrant women navigate — and transform — the intertwined structures of labour, legality, and belonging.

Re-counting gender in migration studies

The early neglect of women in migration studies reflected a broader epistemological tendency to treat migrants as a homogeneous category, as if they carried "only one piece of cultural baggage" (Harzig, 1999, p. 19). Within a field shaped by patriarchal, Eurocentric, and economistic assumptions, the category of *the migrant* was implicitly male: men's experiences served as the universal reference point, while women's trajectories were either ignored or framed as derivative. This gendered invisibility was often justified by the claim that, during the great transatlantic and intra-European migrations, women were numerically fewer or less mobile; when acknowledged at all, they appeared as dependents or passive "followers" of men (Page Moch, 2005; Kofman, 1999). Such reasoning not only distorted historical realities but also obscured the many ways in which women have always been active agents in migration—shaping household decisions, sustaining transnational family economies, and influencing mobility patterns even when they themselves did not cross borders (Morokvasic, 1993; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994).

From the 1980s onward, feminist scholars decisively challenged these gender-blind paradigms, demonstrating that the apparent predominance of men in migration statistics often stemmed from systematic undercounting and gender bias in record-keeping, rather than from actual demographic realities (Harzig, 2000; DeLaet, 1999). Re-examining census and port-of-entry data, researchers demonstrated that women often migrated in numbers comparable to men during key phases of the so-called "mass migrations," challenging the assumption that earlier migration waves were predominantly male (Kofman, 1999; Zlotnik, 2003). Even in migration regimes traditionally portrayed as male domains—such as the European guest-worker systems of the 1950s–1970s or colonial labour circuits—female labour was integral, encompassing domestic service, industrial work, and professional occupations (Kofman & Raghuram, 2022; Donato & Gabaccia, 2015; Mahler & Pessar, 2001).

This historical reappraisal matters not merely as a numerical correction but as a challenge to the gender-erasing logics that have long shaped the study of migration. By exposing the gendered assumptions embedded in data, categorisation, and historiography, feminist scholars have shown that migration must be understood as a profoundly gendered social process rather than a neutral demographic phenomenon.

Recent global migration data confirm what feminist scholars have long argued: that women have always been central to human mobility. According to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2022), women now constitute approximately 48 percent of the world's 281 million international migrants—around 136 million individuals. In Europe and North America, the proportion of women even slightly exceeds parity, representing about 51 percent and 52 percent of all international migrants, respectively (UN DESA, 2022).

This apparent gender balance should not be read as a recent achievement but as evidence of a longer historical continuity that earlier research and record-keeping practices failed to acknowledge. The seeming novelty of women's global mobility reflects less a demographic transformation than a methodological correction—a recognition belatedly catching up with a reality long obscured by gender-biased data, conceptual frameworks, and state recording systems (Morokvasic, 2007, 2013; Zlotnik, 1995, 2003; Kofman, 1999; Donato & Gabaccia, 2015).

The longer historical arc of women's (in)visibility in migration scholarship is crystallised in the evolving debate around the concept of the *"feminisation of migration."* First popularised by *The Age of Migration* (Castles & Miller, 1993) and circulated in global policy discourse through the *UN World Survey on the Role of Women in Development* (1995), the term gained traction as evidence accumulated of women's growing presence in cross-border mobility. Yet what appeared as a demographic revelation was, as feminist scholars have argued, primarily a discursive one: a reframing of visibility rather than a new empirical reality. For this reason, the language of *feminisation* has been increasingly criticised for constructing women's migration as a new or exceptional development, obscuring its long historical continuity and structural embeddedness. In doing so, it inadvertently reproduces the same temporal and analytical biases that once rendered women's mobility invisible within migration research (Schmoll, 2024; Tittensor & Mansouri, 2017; Mora & Piper, 2021).

From Invisibility to Framework: Feminist Foundations in the 1980s–1990s

Before turning to the theoretical advances of recent years, it is important to recall the early revisionist phase of scholarship on migrant women in the 1980s and 1990s that began to pierce what many described as the "invisibility curtain" surrounding migrant women. This transformation was propelled by the wider feminist interrogation of women's social positioning, the expanding presence of migrant women as discernible cohorts in international migration, their ever more visible socio-economic contributions, and crucially, I think, the emergence of epistemologies articulated by diasporic and migrant women themselves who theorised their own experiences and produced situated knowledges that challenge Eurocentric essentialising paradigms (Kofman et al. 2000; Mohanty 2003; Nagar and Swarr 2010).

The landmark *International Migration Review* special issue on *Women in Migration* (1984) marked a turning point, consolidating and amplifying the insights of the 1970s studies that had begun to challenge the presumed universality of the male migrant. Bringing together contributions from scholars such as Mirjana Morokvašić, Joanne Nagel, and Nina Glick Schiller, the issue reframed women not as passive dependents or "followers," but as economic actors,

transnational agents, and social reproducers whose experiences illuminate the gendered dynamics of global labour and family migration. [2]

These studies recovered and revalued the economic agency of migrant women, challenging the long-standing assumption that their work was secondary or merely supplementary to male employment. Although still grounded in an economicist framework, these studies fundamentally questioned what counts as labour, showing that reproductive, care, and informal economies constitute core sites of value production within global capitalism rather than marginal or auxiliary spheres. They documented women's participation across a wide spectrum of labour markets, revealing how migrant women's paid and unpaid activities sustain both household economies and national growth in sending and receiving countries alikes. This empirical visibility prompted a theoretical turn: rather than merely counting women among migrant workers, scholars began to question the very structures and hierarchies that organise their labour and mobility.

Out of this early foundational phase, two major strands of inquiry took shape. The first, rooted in structuralist and political-economy frameworks, deconstructed women's participation in global labour economies and their precarious legal status. The second, drawing on feminist and sociological perspectives, broadened the analytical gaze beyond the workplace to explore how migration is sustained through household dynamics, care relations, and transnational social fields.

Structuralist accounts problematised and deconstructed women's participation in global labour economies and their precarious legal status, highlighting how gender intersects with class and ethnicity to structure both women's subordination and resistance (Boyle & Halfacree, 1999; Chant & Radcliffe, 1992). Informed by migration-systems theory (Castles & Miller, 2009), these studies moved beyond individualist explanations to situate women's migration within the structural dynamics of global capitalism that generate both opportunity and constraint. Annie Phizacklea (1998), among others, highlighted how uneven economic development and labour-market segmentation rendered women a *relative labour surplus*, especially in low-paid, precarious sectors such as domestic service, garment production, and sex work.

At the same time, feminist scholars expanded the lens beyond the workplace to include the household and transnational social fields. Classic studies by Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo (1994), Patricia Pessar (1984), and Sarah Mahler (1999) highlighted women's agency as wage earners, caregivers, and organisers of family migration, as well as their role in sustaining transnational kin networks. These works framed migration not simply as an economic response but as a gendered and relational process of social reproduction, that paved the way to the transnational turn of the later years.

Yet despite these achievements, mainstream migration studies during the 1990s largely continued to assume the migrant as a male subject, still awaiting what Page Moch (2005) termed the "maturation of feminist thought" — the shift in mainstream migration studies, from merely adding women into existing frameworks to rethinking migration itself as a

[2] Morokvašić's programmatic essay, "Birds of Passage are also Women" (1984), became emblematic of this revisionist turn. By contesting the male-centred metaphor of the bird of passage—long used to describe temporary labour migration—she argued that women's mobility, too, had always been integral to the so-called "guestworker" and postcolonial circuits.

gendered social process. [3] As Eleonore Kofman (1999, p. 270) observed, despite "the long reach of feminist-inspired studies in so many other areas", gender had made only a limited theoretical impact on migration research and migration theory remained "fixated around the figure of a migrant man" (Kofman & Raghuram, 2022, p. 281). More than two decades later, this critique still resonates: while policies continue to neglect how migration is deeply gendered, often with "unforeseen repercussions for women" (Pelicioni, 2023).

Post-2000s Developments: Transnational Social Fields And The Political Economy Of Care

Building on the foundational feminist critiques of the 1980s–1990s that first challenged the assumption of the male migrant subject, migration scholarship entered what Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004) described as the transnational turn. This perspective maps migrants' lives across overlapping social fields and foregrounds the dialectic between everyday practice and global structure. This has opened up to several areas of interest, including global chains of care, the feminization of survival, and practices of gendered connectivity: Research within this framework highlights how economic, political, and cultural dynamics intersect across transnational spaces, shaping both origin and destination contexts as sites where gendered emancipation and autonomy are negotiated, enabled, and constrained. Migration thus emerges as a phenomenon that is at once structural and intimate, as earlier feminist analyses had anticipated: it organises global markets and mobility regimes while shaping the everyday textures of family life and gender relations. This synthesis is exemplified in the approaches that focus on the "gendered geographies of power" (Mahler & Pessar, 2003) through which care, remittances, and relational maintenance sustain global migration systems. Within these approaches, migrant women are seen to exercise and negotiate agency across multiple, intersecting scales—spanning the household, community, and transnational labour markets (Page Moch, 2005; Calavita, 2004; Phizacklea, 2003; Gabaccia & Donato, 2015). These approaches demonstrate that women's migration—whether through labour markets or household strategies—is both a deliberate family project and a key source of transnational support (Anthias & Lazaridis, 2000; Lutz, 2010; Kofman et al., 2015).

Building on this theoretical foundation, scholarship on global care chains (Hochschild, 2014; Kofman, 2015; Parreñas, 2015; Yeates, 2012; Marchetti, 2020; Marchetti, 2021) reveal how the transnational circulation of reproductive and affective labour sustains the global division of care. Migrant women's care chains sustain affluent households and welfare systems in the Global North while displacing the emotional and physical costs of reproduction onto racialised women in the Global South (Ehrenreich & Hochschild 2003). Far from being peripheral, migrant women's care work is seen as a structural pillar of contemporary capitalism, reproducing the very inequalities of class, gender, and geography on which global economies depend. The significance of this contribution is paradigmatic, marking a profound shift in how globalisation and mobility are theorised within the social sciences. This strand of theorisation advances earlier feminist critiques by rethinking and re-signifying what counts as

[3] A cursory review of leading migration manuals and handbooks published over the past decades likewise reveals that gender has rarely been treated as a central analytical category, even within the core of migration scholarship. The third revised edition of *The Age of Migration* (Castles & Miller, 2003), while introducing the notion of the "feminisation of migration," devoted only a few paragraphs to gender, primarily in relation to labour and citizenship (pp. 4, 161–162, 187–188). Similarly, *Worlds in Motion* (Massey et al., 2005) framed migration largely through economic and political participation, offering little sense of migrant women's influence in other spheres of social life.

labour, moving beyond the economistic focus on male-coded forms of formal employment to demonstrate that reproductive and care work are foundational to global economies. In doing so, it also marks an epistemological shift away from narrowly economistic conceptions of production and value, towards an understanding of globalisation as a gendered and relational process sustained through the affective and reproductive labours that underpin transnational life.

At the macroeconomic scale, other scholars have highlighted how the steady flow of remittances sent by migrant women has become indispensable to many sending states. As Rhacel Parreñas (2001) demonstrated for example, in her analysis of Filipina migrant women[4], transnational earnings simultaneously reproduce social life in destination countries and sustain the economies and kinship networks left behind. This pattern is widely seen as emblematic of feminised migration from the Global South, where women's labour and remittances sustain both global care regimes and national development strategies. Migrant women's labour has emerged as underwriting entire economies, exemplifying what Sassen (2003) terms the *feminisation of survival* – a notion that highlights how global systems of reproduction and economic growth depend disproportionately on women's cross-border labour and the often invisible care responsibilities that sustain both households and nations.

Emerging alongside the transnational turn in migration studies, a substantial body of research has examined the gendered practices of connectivity through which migrants sustain transnational social worlds and reproduce transnationalism from below. This line of work challenges further the enduring separation between the economic and the emotional, demonstrating that care, intimacy, and everyday interaction are key mechanisms through which transnational ties and belonging are maintained. The scholarship has turned to the quiet, intimate spaces of mobility (kitchens and living rooms, WhatsApp calls and remittance notes, the repetitive labour of care that sustains families across distance) to expose the dense entanglement of global structural forces with the subtitles of everyday existence (Kilkey & Palenga-Möllenbeck, 2016; Baldassar et al. 2007). Within these intimate geographies, gender operates as a key organising principle: women are expected to maintain social and affective ties and are frequently cast as symbolic bearers of collective identity, responsible for the reproduction of cultural continuity (Yuval-Davis, Anthias & Kofman, 2005). Yet these same roles provide space for agency, as women remake the very boundaries they are asked to guard through collective practices of connectivity and subtle reshaping of traditions. Seemingly mundane acts—coordinating childcare across continents, sharing meals via video link, managing household finances from afar—emerge as pivotal to the reproduction of transnational households and diasporic communities and, by extension, to the functioning of global migration regimes. As Umut Erel (2009) argues, such practices constitute forms of gendered *cultural citizenship* through which migrant women claim social membership and belonging, transforming care, communication, and creativity into political and affective resources. In this sense, the affective and domestic labours of everyday life sustain not only family and community ties but also the broader infrastructures of transnational economies

[4] In countries such as the Philippines, for instance, women constitute a substantial proportion of the overseas workforce—particularly in care and domestic sectors—and their remittances have become a vital pillar of the national economy, accounting for approximately 9–10% of GDP in recent years (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2023; World Bank, 2024).

and diasporic social worlds (Baldassar, 2001, 2007; Parreñas, 2005; Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002; Boccagni, 2012; Erel, 2009).

Adding to this line of inquiry, feminist migration scholarship has further developed earlier theorisations of migration as a gendered project of emancipation, highlighting how mobility becomes a site through which migrant women (and men) contest patriarchal norms, assert autonomy, and reconfigure the boundaries of belonging and care, both abroad and at home. Earlier studies had already noted that women may migrate to avoid surrendering wages to a husband or father, to escape abusive relationships, to raise children independently, or to flee gender-based violence such as female genital mutilation (Gray, 1996; Phizacklea, 1996; Kofman, 1999; Morokvasic, 1993). Building on the foundational insights of scholars such as Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias, this research extends the analysis from individual empowerment to the collective and relational processes that sustain migratory projects. Their concepts of *translocational positionality* and the *politics of belonging* reveal how women's migratory trajectories are embedded within networks of care, kinship, and citizenship that both reproduce and unsettle national and gendered boundaries. These frameworks conceptualise women's identities as fluid and relational, shaped by shifting social locations that are continually redefined through context, temporality, and meaning (Yuval-Davis, 1997, 2011; Anthias, 1998, 2000, 2012). In this perspective, migration is not merely a movement across space but a social practice through which gendered identities and relations are re-articulated across multiple scales of power—from the intimate and familial to the transnational and institutional (Christou & Kofman, 2022; Freedman et al., 2023; Dib, 2025).

These contributions have also drawn attention to (and challenged) the persistent discourses through which women's cross-border mobility is framed—discourses of sexuality, respectability, and protection that simultaneously pathologise and domesticate female agency (Donato & Gabaccia, 2015; Freedman et al., 2023; Schmoll, 2024). Migrant women are often represented in public discourse and policy debates either as victims of trafficking and exploitation or as threats to national, moral, or familial order. This moral surveillance extends from the state to the intimate sphere: policies regulating domestic work, marriage migration, and reproductive labour often rest on assumptions about women's vulnerability or deviance (Anderson, 2000, 2010; Constable, 2009; Freedman et al., 2023). The feminist scholarship shows that women's migration can be read as both a practice that reproduces and a force that unsettles the gendered and racialised power relations regulating who may move, on what terms, and with what legitimacy—making visible migration as an arena where autonomy and subordination are ceaselessly negotiated.

Taken together, these perspectives mark the consolidation and maturity of what Camille Schmoll (2024, p. 168) describes as the *"feminising of the gaze"* in migration studies. What earlier feminist scholars had articulated as a necessary corrective to androcentric paradigms has now evolved into a widely recognised analytical framework. No longer confined to the margins of the field, this approach foregrounds migrant women's lived experiences—of care, affective labour, and embodied vulnerability—as central to understanding the workings of global mobility regimes.

Rather than treating women's experiences as supplementary or exceptional, this body of scholarship reveals gender as constitutive of the very infrastructures that sustain migration—its emotional economies, gendered border controls, and everyday strategies of survival. In

doing so, it reorients migration theory toward the intimate and affective domains through which power operates, linking the global and the personal, the structural and the embodied.

This paradigmatic consolidation also challenges the economicist and utilitarian logics that have long shaped migration research. Even when migration is driven by material necessity—or when policy frameworks confine women's mobility within rigid categories such as *labour migration* (Anderson, 2019)—the gendered social field remains constitutive of migratory experience. Women's migration, therefore, cannot be understood as a passive reaction to poverty or coercion; it entails complex negotiations of autonomy and constraint, situated within intersecting structures of gender, family, class, and power. In foregrounding these tensions, feminist migration studies have decisively unsettled the enduring binary between victimhood and agency that once defined the field (Parreñas, 2001; Silvey, 2004).

While acknowledging the persistence of structural constraints—including gendered asymmetries, gender-based violence, and the systematic devaluation of care—these strands of scholarship have often retained a generative and, at times, optimistic orientation. They foreground migrant women's capacity to sustain transnational families, redistribute care across borders, and renegotiate gender relations, thereby contributing to new forms of belonging and social reproduction. Although gender is recognised as central to the "most damaging [negative and racist] constructions of today's immigrants" (Page Moch, 2005, p. 104), much of this literature—perhaps as part of an effort to reclaim women's agency from earlier depictions of passivity—has advanced a vision of migration as a potentially transformative and empowering process, one that enables women to reshape identities and challenge patriarchal norms rather than merely endure displacement or loss. Yet, as the tightening of border regimes, rising precarity, and global crises have intensified over the past decade, this earlier optimism has been increasingly unsettled, revealing the fragility of empowerment narratives within the current conjuncture.

From Transnational Optimism to Critical Intersectionality: The New Directions of Feminist Migration Studies

The most recent scholarship highlights a decisive turn from the celebratory transnational perspectives that dominated earlier debates to a more critical orientation attentive to the intersectionality of gender, race, and power. Over the past decade, it has been compelled to confront the entrenchment of repressive migration policies, border control, criminalisation and deterrence approaches, which inflict disproportionate harm on migrants broadly and on migrant women and other already-marginalised minorities in particular. Even academic inquiry itself has been subjected to mounting political scrutiny, as governments and funding bodies increasingly question the legitimacy of critical migration research and impose ideological litmus tests on grant programs (Schmoll, 2024; Lacroix et all. 2021; Stierl, 2020).

In this context, scholarship on migrant women has entered a decisive critical phase, advancing intersectional analyses that reveal how gender, race, class, and legal status intersect with colonial legacies and racialised global capitalism (Bhattacharyya, 2018) to structure both mobility and immobility of women.

Despite the longstanding incorporation of gender into migration research, growing frustration persists as evidence continues to show that, even with the extensive documentation of the harms experienced by migrant women, gender analysis has made only limited inroads into

mainstream migration policy and practice (Serraglio & Thornton, 2024; Ruiz & Donato, 2025). This gap between critical scholarship and institutional response underscores a persistent epistemic and political disjuncture: while feminist research exposes the structural violence embedded in global mobility systems, policy frameworks remain largely anchored in gender-neutral, market-oriented, and securitised logics that obscure these inequalities.

The gap is not merely analytical but structural: feminist insights are often treated as ancillary to migration research, while policy frameworks instrumentalise gender as a tool of governance rather than a critique of power. As Schmoll (2024) notes, migration and border regimes increasingly deploy the rhetoric of feminist values—through gender-mainstreaming or anti-trafficking initiatives—yet these measures frequently expand surveillance, restrict mobility, and entrench deportability. Framed as protection, they reproduce racialised and gendered hierarchies, exposing migrant women, particularly women of colour, to precarious labour, detention, and gender-based violence. In this way, feminist language is co-opted to legitimise control, transforming an emancipatory discourse into a regulatory instrument.

Precisely this paradox has compelled recent feminist migration scholars to situate migration research within broader struggles over power, knowledge production, and political engagement that shape the global governance of mobility. Recognising that knowledge is never neutral, these scholars have exposed how academic and policy frameworks often reproduce the same hierarchies they seek to critique, privileging Eurocentric epistemologies and state-centric understandings of movement (Anderson, 2010, 2019; Erel et al.2017; Gutiérrez Rodríguez, 2018; Tuck & Yang, 2014). This has led to calls for more reflexive, participatory, and decolonial methodologies that acknowledge the positionality of the researcher and the entanglement of knowledge with structures of power (Mountz, 2020; Bhambra, 2014). Feminist migration studies have thus increasingly aligned analytical inquiry with political engagement, advancing what Mountz (2020) terms an *"engaged geography"*—one that connects the study of borders and migration to broader struggles for justice, recognition, and epistemic accountability. Viewed through this lens, feminist postcolonial research may be understood not only as an instrument of critique but also as a potential site of resistance—one that participates, however partially, in the collective endeavour to reimagine mobility beyond the pervasive logics of surveillance, marketisation, and exclusion that continue to shape the contemporary border regime.

In line with these developments, recent scholarship has shown that states are not neutral managers of mobility but active producers of migrant categories and hierarchies of belonging. Legal designations within European migration regimes—such as *temporary worker*, *asylum seeker*, or *irregular migrant*—do more than describe legal status: they rank rights, constrain agency, and naturalise inequality, with profound gendered implications. These categories intersect with norms of domesticity and dependency, positioning women—particularly racialised and migrant women—as vulnerable, compliant, or economically supplementary subjects within stratified labour and legal hierarchies (Anderson, 2000, 2019; Bastia & Piper, 2019; Akkoyun & Dalaman, 2024). Visa, citizenship, and asylum regimes embed heteronormative ideals of wifehood and dependency, funnelling women into temporary, dependent, or undocumented statuses that render their labour invisible and subject their intimate lives to surveillance (Freedman et al., 2023; Marchetti, 2020; Marchetti, 2021). This dependency is most evident in spouse-linked visa systems and family-reunification policies, where residence rights hinge on a partner's sponsorship. Violence, abandonment, or divorce can lead to the loss of legal status,

deportation, or irregularity, while recognition of gender-based persecution often requires women to *perform vulnerability* to obtain protection (Erel et al., 2017; Freedman, 2015; Roy, Anitha, & Yalamarty, 2023; Latouche, 2023). This regulatory apparatus of migration reproduces male-breadwinner assumptions and obscure women's economic and social agency, even as increasing numbers of women migrate independently for employment, education, and self-realisation.

Another significant strand of recent scholarship within gendered migration studies draws on intersectional perspectives to demonstrate that inequalities of race, gender, class, and citizenship in destination countries are not incidental but structurally embedded. This highlights how migration policies and labour markets intersect to produce and sustain stratified regimes of access to rights, resources, and recognition. It is not only in their position as migrant women, but also as racialised subjects, that their labour becomes systematically devalued across the skill spectrum. Many migrant women are channelled into low-wage, feminised care work regardless of their qualifications. This structural devaluation is sustained by a convergence of institutional and cultural mechanisms: licensing restrictions, non-recognition of foreign qualifications, and restrictive visa regimes intersect with racialised and gendered stereotypes that construct women of colour as naturally predisposed to care, service, or subordinate roles (Bhattacharyya, 2018; Mayblin & Turner, 2020; Sharma, 2020; Erel et al., 2017; Bastia & Piper, 2019). These contributions expose how colonial legacies, gendered labour regimes, and transnational care chains together organise the differentiated value of work and the uneven distribution of mobility and recognition.

Not even highly educated professionals are immune to these mechanisms as they experience deskilling as credentials go unrecognised and careers stall (Sondhi, Raghuram, & Herman, 2025). Research on skilled migration has been especially incisive in revealing that, even within the ostensibly meritocratic domain of high-skilled mobility, migration operates through hierarchies of gender, race, and citizenship rather than as a neutral circulation of talent. Evidence shows that highly skilled migrant women face persistent "brain waste" as foreign qualifications are discounted (Elo et al., 2025; Raghuram, 2021), while segmented labour markets and patriarchal workplace cultures relegate them below their skill level (Jogulu et al., 2025; Bolzani et al., 2021; Sondhi et al., 2025). These outcomes stem from migration policy—points systems, recognition procedures—and intersecting factors such as race, class, and family status that limit networks and career advancement (Isaakyan & Triandafyllidou, 2016; Jogulu et al., 2025). The care–career tension further slows or derails professional integration, as expectations of caregiving and spousal-visa constraints persist (Riaño, 2014, 2022).

Building on these intersectional and postcolonial critiques, another body of research has illuminated the ways in which state power, colonial legacies, and global capitalism generate specific vulnerabilities for migrant women in transit and in asylum processes, demonstrating that migration control operates as a system of structural and gendered violence rather than a neutral regime of regulation. Drawing on the emerging field of Critical Border Studies, this line of work challenges the notion of borders as static territorial boundaries. Instead, it understands borders as gendered and racialised institutions that operate through everyday practices of governance, surveillance, and labour control—continuously producing categories of legality and illegality, agency and dependence (Yuval-Davis et al., 2019; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013; De Genova, 2017; Tazzioli, 2020). This scholarship traces how European and global migration orders—rooted in racialised capitalism and the afterlives of empire—are

reinforced through visa restrictions, detention infrastructures, carrier sanctions, and maritime interceptions that police mobility while producing hierarchies of worth. These intersecting regimes systematically expose migrant women, especially women of colour, to exploitation, trafficking, sexual assault, and other forms of coercion. Such harms are not accidental but constitutive features of policy architectures that criminalise movement, institutionalise deportability, and normalise precarity in camps, shelters, and informal labour markets (Borges, 2024; Fredman, 2016; Farris, 2017; Ilcan, 2021). Scholars emphasise that these spaces function as "border zones" where gender, race, and class converge to render women hyper-visible as bodies to be policed and simultaneously invisible as rights-bearing subjects, illustrating how global migration governance reproduces colonial patterns of domination and capitalist extraction (Schmoll 2024; Tazzioli, 2019; Yuval-Davis et al., 2019).[5]

Looking Ahead: Agency, Constraint, and the Future of Feminist Migration Studies

Over the past four decades, feminist scholarship has profoundly transformed the study of migration and women—from a field once structured by androcentric and economistic assumptions into a complex, intersectional, and reflexive arena of inquiry. Yet, across these intellectual transformations, one interpretive tension has persisted: how to account for women's agency without obscuring the structural constraints that shape it. This question—of how autonomy and subordination, empowerment and precarity, coexist within the same migratory experience—remains one of the most enduring and conceptually generative challenges in gendered migration studies.

Within dense structures of domination, migrant women carve out spaces of autonomy, yet theorising agency amid systemic violence continues to test the limits of feminist analysis. Critical and intersectional scholarship reconceptualises agency as action within and against power: women sustain families and economies while confronting surveillance, deterrence, and racial capitalism. The early binaries of the "victim" and the "emancipated actor" have given way to more nuanced accounts of entangled resistance and subjugation, in which empowerment and disempowerment unfold simultaneously and relationally.

Transnational and intersectional perspectives make this tension especially visible. The former highlights the relational and reproductive dimensions of agency—how women's everyday practices sustain families, communities, and transnational social life—while the latter exposes the structural violence and racialised hierarchies that delimit and condition such practices (Schmoll, 2024). Together, they reframe migration as a process shaped both by global political economies and by the intimate negotiations of care, work, and belonging that unfold within them. Gender, race, class, and citizenship emerge not as fixed analytical categories but as

[5] Critical studies of migrant sex workers highlight this exclusion with particular force. Research shows that sex work, though a significant site of transnational labour, is often treated solely as a moral or criminal issue rather than as work, denying migrant women access to the rights and protections afforded to other labour sectors (Anderson, 2010; Mai, 2018; Marchetti, 2020, Marchetti, 2021). This moral and legal marginalisation not only exposes migrant sex workers to violence and trafficking but also reinforces racialised and gendered hierarchies, casting migrant women as victims or deviants rather than economic actors, contributing to the broader erasure of women's economic agency and the structural mechanisms that keep migrant women's contributions outside the realm of "legitimate" work. Moreover, some scholars suggest that transactional sexual relationships should also been held as strategic practices, enabling refugee and migrant women to navigate the absence of economic resources or secure legal status. From this perspective, such relationships are not merely signs of victimisation but can be understood as acts of agency and resistance, through which women contest the structural conditions that would otherwise render them passive subjects of exploitation (see Mutambara et al. 2023)

overlapping and fluid positionalities, while ethnicity, religion, and sexuality introduce further layers of inequality and differentiation within migrant groups themselves (Kofman et al., 2000). These trajectories remind us both of the distance travelled—from women's historical invisibility in migration research to their critical centrality in contemporary scholarship—and of the uncharted questions that continue to animate the study of gendered migration in an unequal world. They draw attention to the shifting epistemological and political stakes of studying mobility, care, and labour through a gendered lens, while also revealing the persistent silences, exclusions, and hierarchies that feminist and postcolonial scholars continue to interrogate. In this sense, the field remains in motion, marked by ongoing efforts to reframe migration not merely as movement across borders, but as a complex process entangled with power, affect, and social reproduction.

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